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ALFRED NOYES AND THE REVIEWERS

Mr. Alfred Noyes is a young man. He was born September 16, 1880, and was educated at Exeter College, Oxford. He pulled an oar in the College "boat" and was writing poems while an undergraduate. At the first publication of his verse in the *London Times* he was still in residence at Oxford. Leaving college, he concluded that he wished to write poetry, and that he would devote himself to poetry exclusively. Difficult and daring as this might appear as a means of gaining his livelihood, he was certain it was the proper one.

With the intention of showing young men of poetic genius that they need not dissipate their energies writing book reviews for London literary periodicals, Mr. Noyes aimed to prove that poetry has a real and legitimate place in the world. He has made a business of poetry. He has contributed to the *London Daily Mail*, the *Pall Mall Magazine*, the *Spectator*, *Speaker*, *Blackwood's Magazine*, *Outlook*, *Fortnightly Review*, *Atlantic Monthly*, the *London Nation*, *Standard*, the *Bookman*, *McClure's Magazine*, *North American Review*, *Yale Review*, and *Forum*. His poems have been collected and published in book form in England, as follows:

"The Loom of Years," 1902; "The Flower of Old Japan," 1903; *Poems*, 1904; "Forest of Wild Thyme," 1905; "Drake: An English Epic," 1906-8; "Forty Singing Seamen," 1907; "The Enchanted Island," 1909; *Collected Poems*, 1910; "Robin Hood," 1912; "The Carol of the Fir-Tree," 1913.

American impressions have been as follows: *Poems*, 1906; "Flower of Old Japan" (including "Forest of Wild Thyme"), 1907; "Golden Hynde," 1908; "Drake, an English Epic," 1909; "The Enchanted Island," 1910; "Sherwood," 1911; "Tales of the Mermaid Tavern," 1913; *Collected Poems*, 1913.

In addition to these titles Mr. Noyes has published some anthologies as well as a critical biography of William Morris in the English Men of Letters Series. But these two lists comprise the body of his poetic achievement.

His work, as we may see by merely looking through one of

the volumes of his *Collected Poems*, covers a wide range. There are many stories of the sea, many rich and gorgeous word-pictures, and much high idealism. There are touches which remind us of "the lyric lips of Astrophel," splendid and powerful passages of blank verse reminiscent of Marlowe,—with Marlowe's eye for contrasting color;—there are moods of patriotic, nationalistic fervor, as well as inspiring poems on international peace. Then, again, on one occasion he writes in a tone of intellectual, moral teaching, what Brian Hooker called his "didactic religiosity;"¹ on another, his is the mysticism of deep accepted faith.

Twice he has gone into the child's world:—

All our fairy rigging shone
Richly as a rainbow seen
Where the moonlight floats upon
Gossamers of gold and green:
All the tiny stars were bright;
Beaten gold the bowsprit was;
But our pilot was the night,
And our chart a looking-glass.

This is a sample of the wonderland into which Mr. Noyes has led, a wonderland in which he sings delicate lyrics of "the maidens of Miyako . . . with dreamy hands of pearl"; or of—

Satin sails in a crimson dawn
Over the silky silver sea;
Purple veils of the dark withdrawn;
Heavens of pearl and porphyry;—

a wonderland where we hear many voices in many tunes "Singing songs of Old Japan."

His most characteristic work is in narration, pure description, and the singing of little songs. He has revived the grandeur of "the spacious days of good Queen Bess"; he has sung many songs well and shown us the light of many high ideals; and, professionally, he has succeeded both in making his living by writing poetry and in gaining the good opinion of the critics.

In England, reviewers of early volumes measured out generous welcome. "The Flower of Old Japan" a writer in the London *Academy* characterized as an "exquisite little book,"

¹ *Bookman*, vol. 31, p. 484.

which had "caught the aroma of a lost fragrance which only poets can restore."² The book was likewise praised by the *Spectator*. The 1904 volume, entitled *Poems*, elicited rather general praise; but two reviewers, in addition to some glowing comments on the "magic of words," his "crowning grace of charm,"³ and his "complete success as a ballad writer,"⁴ remarked that there were pieces in the collection not up to the standard. "He should encourage the discipline of self-criticism, . . . remember Tennyson's continual striving for condensation, . . . and keep himself in hand—not to write too much, and not to write too often."⁵ "The Forest of Wild Thyme" was said by one⁶ to have all the characteristic strength and weakness of Mr. Noyes, . . . much dross mixed with the gold, . . . many jingling cadences mingled with the music." On the other hand the *Saturday Review*⁷ and the *Athenæum*⁸ rendered high praise of the same book.

"Forty Singing Seamen" was not very favorably received. The "vein of fantastic humour"⁹ in the title poem, the "rare lyrical gifts,"¹⁰ and Mr. Noyes's qualities as a balladist¹¹ were well noticed; but the general opinion seemed to be that "sweetness rather than depth"¹² was his forte, and that in abstracts and with blank verse, our poet was poor. The *Saturday Review* said:¹³ "Mr. Noyes has already written a certain amount of verse that contains promise of a sort," but "the serious poems are not what we now want from young writers of promise. It is depressing to find a really vigorous and inventive pen moving contentedly in a safe orbit of hackneyed conceptions. We wish that Mr. Noyes would continue to hunt fairy gleams and not 'run in straiter lines of chiselled speech.'" On the other hand, he was told by the *Spectator*,¹⁴ which liked the title poem and "The Golden Hynde," that he was "not good on the high notes" and had best keep to the "middle paths of human loves and pleasures." So, between two fires, what can a poet do?

² Vol. 64, p. 273.

⁴ *Spectator*, vol. 94, p. 113.

⁶ *Spectator*, vol. 95, p. 761.

⁸ Dec. 16, 1905.

¹⁰ *Athenæum*, Feb. 8, 1908.

¹² *Athenæum*, Feb. 8, 1908.

³ *Blackwood's*, vol. 177, p. 251.

⁵ *Blackwood's*, vol. 177, p. 251.

⁷ Feb. 17, 1906.

⁹ *Dial*, Apr. 16, 1907.

¹¹ *Spectator*, Jan. 3, 1908.

¹³ Feb. 1, 1908. ¹⁴ Jan. 25, 1908.

In the face of this criticism, Mr. Noyes boldly attacked a larger theme—the story of the British seaman Drake. He had been told he could not write blank verse. Yet “Drake” was said to have “ease and strength and fire,”¹⁵ said to be “worthy of praise . . . stately and sonorous” and “full of the elemental stuff of poetry.”¹⁶ It was called in the *Spectator* “a beautiful poem,” his “finest achievement,” with “passages which rank Mr. Noyes among the ablest modern masters of blank verse”;¹⁷ and was elsewhere highly spoken of, in the *Dial*,¹⁸ in the *Academy*,¹⁹ and in the *London Times*.²⁰ All the reviewers mentioned in a laudatory fashion the interpolated lyrics; and most held that the “lyric mood” infused into the blank verse made its merit. One critic, he of the *Athenæum*,²¹ declared that Mr. Noyes was a lyrist and should not strive to be otherwise, that the inspiration of “Drake” was not continuous, that the blank verse was made readable in spots by lyric coloring, and that the whole was a “spasmodic rather than a sustained effort—a series of purple patches linked up by colourless narrative.” Andrew Lang inserted in a newspaper column: “There appears to be no recent literature worth writing about, unless it be Mr. Alfred Noyes’ epic which, like all epics but two (and these are three thousand years old), is ‘good in parts.’”²²

“Drake” is the book which gave Mr. Noyes a distinctive place among English poets. A sustained effort on a large scale, it raised him above the multitude of mere incidental songsters; henceforth he stood on a higher level. Kipling and Swinburne, of acknowledged leadership among the poets, gladly received him to their standing. Each wrote a very enthusiastic personal letter to Mr. Noyes. When “The Enchanted Island” was issued, Edmund Gosse, admittedly of the front rank of critics, and Theodore Watts-Dunton rated Mr. Noyes as the foremost living poet, the greatest since the great Victorians, Tennyson and Swinburne. Three of the periodicals, however, did not fancy the book. The *Athenæum*, which had praised the “Forest of

¹⁵ *Spectator*, Dec. 11, 1909.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Jan. 30, 1909.

¹⁹ July 7, 1908.

²¹ Dec. 26, 1908.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Sept. 1, 1906

¹⁸ Jan. 16, 1910.

²⁰ July 6, 1906.

²² N. Y. *Evening Post*, Feb. 16, 1909.

Wild Thyme," called him "pre-eminently the poet of fairyland," and seemed to wish to keep him writing fairy tales for children; the reviewer remarked, "the part of missionary does not suit Mr. Noyes,"²³ reminding us of the *Saturday Review's* objections to "Forty Singing Seamen," and of Mr. Brian Hooker's comment on "didactic religiosity." The *Spectator* declared itself "disappointed;"²⁴ and it and the *Saturday Review*²⁵ said that Mr. Noyes wrote too much; and, somewhat as *Blackwood's* had done previously, advised him to be less fluent and more condensed; and the *Saturday Review*, as a sort of solace, delivered itself of some very enthusiastic paragraphs.

It is rather interesting to note that the *London Times*, commenting on the "Tales of the Mermaid Tavern" during their serial publication, placed the collection as Mr. Noyes's best work. Comments on the *Collected Poems*, which appeared in 1910, were pretty generally laudatory and remarked the extensive range of subjects. The two volumes were said by the *Tablet* to be "not the work of one poet, but of several, not of one mood, but of a score."²⁶ The *Saturday Review* continued in its former tone, and along with some praise for "the gift of vigorous metre," for his "astonishing aptitude," spoke of him as "playing variations on echoes," in his coolness showing a strong sense of vocation, and of the book as disappointingly offering few glimpses to the mind."²⁷ In fact, the *Saturday Review* has given us two sentences which very well summarize the whole of Mr. Noyes's critical reputation in England. It declared of the poems, "within their range, well-written"; "They are more readable, more inventive, more achieved than the verses of nine out of ten of any current writers. . . . We rank them as talented verse, above the average of such things, but importing little when all is said." Mr. Noyes has seemed too traditional for frantic reforming England of later years.

And now to consider his reputation in America.

The first volume, *Poems*, in 1906, was well-introduced by Mr. Hamilton Wright Mabie, and was rather well received by the

²³ Jan. 1, 1910.

²⁴ Dec. 11, 1909.

²⁵ Jan. 1, 1910.

²⁶ Dec. 3, 1910.

²⁷ Oct. 29, 1910.

critics. In fact, Mr. Noyes has been better treated by the American critics than by the English. The *Outlook* hailed him as "a singer, not a thinly disguised philosopher or reformer,"²⁸ and spoke very highly of his work. The *Nation*,²⁹ Bliss Carman in the *New York Times*,³⁰ the *Review of Reviews*,³¹ and W. M. Payne in the *Dial*,³² all joined in the welcome. Richard Le Gallienne, himself a poet of no mean ability, wrote³³ of the "surprisingly various" themes, "so many different things are done, and all are done so well"; remarked, in the oft-quoted words, the "spontaneous power and freshness, the imaginative vision, the lyric magic," and concluded: "When such poetry is being written, is it not rather stupid to say that there are no poets to-day?"

The *Atlantic Monthly*³⁴ and *Putnam's*³⁵ expressed themselves as pleased by "The Flower of Old Japan," while the *New York Times*³⁶ reviewer disliked the "futile ingenuity" of the fairy tale. Miss Rittenhouse, a well-known American critic of the moderns, remarked: "Mr. Noyes has the instrument, the lute, in tune, but has not met the revealing hour which shall give him a message for its strings. He plays as yet but a wandering prelude, through which at times one catches hints of vaster theme." The *Dial*,³⁷ the *Outlook*,³⁸ the *North American Review*,³⁹ the *Forum*,⁴⁰ and the *Nation*,⁴¹ rather fancied "The Golden Hynde," while the *New York Times*⁴² was characteristically non-committal. Mr. Brian Hooker expressed a note of warning that critics across the ocean had already sounded: "There is the fear that he may diffuse or squander on the present that power which he will surely need one day for greater work as yet undreamed of."

"Drake" met kindly treatment. Brian Hooker wrote: "Promise of English poetry centres to-day in Alfred Noyes."⁴³ In

²⁸ Feb. 16, 1907.

²⁹ Nov. 22, 1906.

³⁰ Feb. 6, 1907.

³¹ Feb., 1907.

³² Apr. 16, 1907.

³³ *North American Review*, vol. 183, p. 1179.

³⁴ Mr. Ferris Greenslet, Dec., 1907.

³⁵ Jessie Rittenhouse, June, 1907.

³⁶ Mr. W. A. Bradley, Sept. 7, 1907.

³⁷ Mr. W. M. Payne, Aug. 1, 1908.

³⁸ May 30, 1908.

³⁹ Mr. Clayton Hamilton, Sept., 1908.

⁴⁰ Mr. Brian Hooker, Apr., 1908.

⁴¹ July 9, 1908.

⁴² Apr. 4, 1908.

⁴³ *Bookman*, Nov., 1909.

"Drake," he "goes down with colours flying. . . . It fails only at the height of its own argument. . . . In degree of achievement it bears no comparison with the *Æneid* or *Paradise Lost*. The "Drake" is a Headless Victory: blemished, imperfect, glorious." Mr. Clayton Hamilton called it "healthy, ardent, fresh and strong . . . unequal in style . . . not a great epic" but "the greatest single contribution that has been made to English poetry since the death of Tennyson."⁴⁴ Two other reviewers, in the *Nation*⁴⁵ and in the *New York Times*,⁴⁶ dismissed it on general grounds as an over-decorated *tour de force*, but lingered to speak fondly of descriptions or of short narrative passages or of beautiful lyrics that had left lasting impressions.

"The Enchanted Island" called forth one particular note of high commendation,⁴⁷ and several of adverse criticism. Mr. Noyes was accused of mediocrity and of commonplace journalistic rhyming by the *Nation*⁴⁸ and by the *Bookman*.⁴⁹ The *Literary Digest* and the *Bookman* expressed for the first time in America an opinion which had previously been advanced in England,—an opinion that some of the poems should have been shortened or omitted: "We do not feel that much of the original matter has been sacrificed. . . . The 'Enchanted Island' is full of golden promises, but no single promise matures into a perfect poem. . . . The effect is blurred by diffuseness," . . . by the "carelessness that so often attends facility."⁵⁰

We may note that "Sherwood" was accepted by two critics at least,⁵¹ seemingly more on the authority of Mr. Noyes's reputation than on the value of the book; and that Mr. Stanley Braithwaite in the Boston *Transcript* placed one of Mr. Noyes's poems among the best twenty-one, and two among the best fifty-five published in 1911. Finally, in the *New York Times*,⁵² a young critic of discernment, reviewing the "Tales of the Mermaid Tavern," which were very favorably received elsewhere, stated:

⁴⁴ *Forum*, May, 1910.

⁴⁵ Jan. 13, 1910.

⁴⁶ April 4, 1908.

⁴⁷ *New York Times*, June 11, 1910.

⁴⁸ July 14, 1910.

⁴⁹ Mr. Brian Hooker, July, 1910.

⁵⁰ *Literary Digest*, April 30, 1910.

⁵¹ *New York Sun*, and *New York Nation*, Jan. 4, 1912.

⁵² Mr. Joyce Kilmer, Apr. 20, 1913.

"Alfred Noyes takes his place undeniably and triumphantly among the masters of English literature."

Mr. Noyes's first visit to America called forth many varying comments. One magazine writer attacked him in notoriously bad taste; another praised him as an unusual poet. Another said that he "has a vision of a new religion of poetry expressive of the harmony of life . . . not unlike that toward which Tennyson groped . . . in an age when men were wondering whether the new discoveries of science had not sounded the death-knell both of poetry and religion."

So, when Mr. James Douglass referred to Mr. Noyes as an "old-fashioned confectioner," he was merely taking an unnecessarily abrupt and uncomplimentary way of saying that Mr. Noyes is a traditional poet. He has been repeatedly spoken of as such. In this vein the *New York Nation* has referred to his "eternal nostalgia of the past," and the *Review of Reviews* has said that he is "destined to be of the greatest service in the re-establishment of the great traditions of English song." A recent paragraph in the *Bookman*,⁵⁸ which appeared before the appointment of Mr. Bridges, even before the death of Mr. Austin, referred to Mr. Noyes as a possible laureate, saying: "Others may do as they please, he will be the poet of England, of her greatness, her history, her destiny."

All of these reviewers who carped and criticised are gradually coming to admire. The "Tales of the Mermaid Tavern" should be ranked as his finest single work of any length. But, in even a cursory reading of the new *Collected Poems*, one learns some of the lights and shadows of life itself, takes pleasure in gorgeous description and light-hearted song, and revels in the alternating power and speed of which he has shown blank verse to be capable. Whoever stops to reflect on the skill of the poet's hand, on the sincerity of his "lyric cry," and on the solid merit behind his versatility, cannot but like his work. Every time those books are read in an easy chair before the library fire the conviction expressed by most of our critics will rise of itself in the mind of the individual reader—the conviction that

⁵⁸ March, 1913.

Alfred Noyes is to be ranked among the best of our modern poets. And yet we must always be moderate in our judgment of our contemporaries for, as Coleridge says, he who has outstripped his fellows and is far in the lead may often have achieved more than another who seems to loom large in our eyes, merely because he stands by our side.

ELBRIDGE COLBY.

Columbia University.